



House of Commons
Education and Skills Committee

**Government Response
to the Committee's
Fourth Report:
Secondary Education:
Diversity of Provision**

**Fourth Special Report of Session
2002–03**

The Education and Skills Committee

The Education and Skills Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for Education and Skills and its associated public bodies.

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Fourth Special Report

On 22 May 2003 the Education and Skills Committee published its Fourth Report¹ of Session 2002–03, Secondary Education: Diversity of Provision. On 24 July we received the Government's response to the Report. The response is reproduced as the Appendix to this Special Report.

Government response

The Select Committee's conclusions and recommendations are in bold text. The Government's response is in plain text. Some of the recommendations and responses have been grouped.

1. City Technology Colleges and Specialist Schools

We are concerned that those schools working towards the recently approved specialisms in the humanities may find it particularly difficult to attract financial support.

Government considered very carefully the recent extension of the specialist schools programme to include humanities. In the sponsorship context it is true that some subject specialisms are of more interest to particular sponsors than others. On balance, however, it was felt that widening the curriculum offer would serve children best and that the sponsorship issue was subsidiary. This does not mean that no major sponsor will emerge with a particular interest in the humanities and it is certainly the case that some sponsors are more concerned to back the programme in general or particular schools rather than a particular subject specialism. For such sponsors, a school's choice of humanities would not be a problem. In addition, the Specialist Schools Trust is funded to help schools raise sponsorship and will be mindful of any special issues. Where there is genuine difficulty the Partnership Fund will be available to help.

2. Choice and diversity

We are concerned about the serious mismatch between the Government's rhetoric on the relationship between choice and diversity and the reality. Research is required into the impact of choice and diversity policy on different regions and different social groups in order that the Government policies on diversity and school transport may be refined to mitigate its negative effect.

The Government wants all secondary schools to play to their strengths and provide a curriculum which offers flexibility and choice to meet the needs of individual pupils. All children should have the opportunity to attend schools which celebrate their distinctive ethos and use their curriculum strengths, increasingly now developed through the Specialist Schools Programme, to raise standards right across the curriculum. The

¹ Fourth Report from the Education and Skills Committee, Session 2002–03, Secondary Education: Diversity of Provision HC 94.

Specialist Schools Programme is not about creating a network of schools which cater narrowly for pupils who, for example, excel in science or art. It is a programme about whole school improvement for the benefit of all pupils; it is not intended that pupils should travel unreasonable distances in order to attend a school with a designated specialism. Parental preference may be influenced where a range of specialisms is available within reasonable travelling distance. The programme is also about collaboration with other schools and the wider community, with one third of the funding devoted to schools' community plans. Overall the intention is for each school to have a centre of excellence that can contribute to the benefit of all pupils across an area.

There is already evidence about the positive impact of diversity. Reference to the main quantitative evidence is made in the response to recommendation nine. In addition, the Ofsted report *Specialist Schools: An evaluation of progress* (2001) recognised specialist status as a catalyst for innovation and sustained school improvement. We expect Ofsted to produce a second evaluation of specialist schools which no doubt will take account of issues raised by the Select Committee. The Leeds University case studies (*The Impact of the Specialist Schools Programme: Case Studies*) (2000) also illustrate the qualitative strengths of the programme.

The national research evaluation project of the six Diversity Pathfinders, which will be completed in autumn 2005, is designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the Diversity Pathfinders in terms of their impacts on developing diversity and collaboration. This will include the extent to which promoting diversity benefits all students across the area.

It is not only the Diversity Pathfinder areas taking a strategic approach to specialist school provision. A strategic approach means LEAs working with all secondary schools to develop a strategy that enables individual schools to establish a specialism that plays to their strengths but also contributes to achieving a balance of specialisms in their area. All of the Excellence in Cities (EiC) authorities, more than a third of all LEAs, have partnerships with their secondary schools in which the strategic issues are discussed and plans prepared. Sheffield, Leicester and Tower Hamlets are examples within the EiC programme but there are also many examples beyond, such as Hampshire, Lincolnshire and West Sussex. Nearly all LEAs now have an overall approach to specialist school provision.

The Committee thought it important that policies on choice and diversity reflect the needs of different regions and social groups. One way this happens is through the local decision-making arrangements introduced in the 1998 Act. Proposals for schools to open, close or change their size or characters are now decided by School Organisation Committees. These are based in each LEA, represent local stakeholders and take account of the views of local people.

Also, LEAs have a statutory duty to plan provision to meet local needs and circumstances, ensuring that the pattern of provision reflects the key Government priority to raise standards of attainment for all pupils. The School Organisation Plan must set out the LEA's current educational provision and how it will address needs over the next five years. New guidance makes it clear that in preparing their Plan the LEA must take into account the Government's desire to promote diversity, but in line with pupils' needs and parental preferences. Guidance also repeats the Government's commitment to enable schools to develop their own distinctive ethos and mission and says that schools that want to secure

specialist status should be able to do so, but they will be expected to collaborate with other schools and share their expertise, thus helping to raise standards for all schools.

3. Diversity and faith

We welcome the Government's more balanced approach to the promotion of faith schools and urge extreme caution in any future expansion of the faith sector. Tensions in Northern Ireland between the two communities illustrate the problems that segregated schools can exacerbate. Future development in this area should guard against the creation of ethnically segregated schooling.

Our education system has developed in partnership with the mainstream Christian churches and we have long acknowledged the desire of some parents to educate their children at church schools. Given the multi-cultural society we live in today it is only right that we extend that option to parents of other faiths as well.

We have said that we welcome more faith schools—but only where there is clear demand from parents and the local community. Applications to open new faith schools are subject to local consultation. The decision as to whether or not an application is approved lies with the local School Organisation Committee, who takes into account the views of parents and the wider community—or, if the committee cannot agree, with the Schools Adjudicator.

Children from different ethnic backgrounds may find themselves in different schools for many reasons other than faith schooling. If different communities live in different places, for reasons to do with employment, housing or urban development, their children will tend to be educated separately even if all attend their local community schools. What is important is that our policies contribute to pupils' tolerance and understanding of racial and religious differences.

Faith schools admit pupils on the basis of their religion, not on ethnicity. Many faith schools already admit pupils of other faiths and no faith, for example, there are Anglican schools with a high proportion of Muslim pupils. Our aim is that all faith schools should adopt inclusive admission policies.

We have made it clear that we want faith schools that enter the state sector to be ready to work in partnership with the local family of schools. We have issued new guidance for School Organisation Committees so that, in considering applications to set up new faith schools in the state sector, they must take into account plans to promote community cohesion—for example through inclusive admission policies or partnership arrangements with other schools, including those of different faiths and of no faith.

Government also understands the need to develop programmes that encourage children and young people to mix, and gain a better understanding about each other's culture. One of the ways we chose to address this was by introducing compulsory education in citizenship in secondary schools from September this year. Now pupils are taught—as part of the National Curriculum, and without reference to religion—about the diversity of national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the UK, and about the need for tolerance, mutual respect and understanding.

4. Diversity Pathfinders

Cooperation between secondary schools in terms of sharing good practice, resources and developing strong community links, is desirable in itself and likely to be an important means of raising pupil achievement in participating schools. However, as is the case in other areas covered in this report, more evidence is required to establish the impact of collaborative models.

The Government welcomes the Committee's commitment to developing models of collaboration. As the Committee recognises, cooperation between secondary schools is desirable in itself and has the potential to raise pupil achievement. The extent to which collaboration takes place and the particular collaborative models adopted will vary depending on the particular schools involved and the basis of their collaborative work. Government recognises the importance of identifying the ways in which different models of collaboration impact on schools in order to establish those which are most effective in sharing good practice to raise standards across schools. Excellence in Cities partnerships encourage collaboration between secondary schools, especially in the specialist schools context, and the six Diversity Pathfinder projects take account of rural and urban contexts and were designed specifically with this in mind. The Government's programmes for Leading Edge partnerships and Federations of schools also place strong emphasis on collaboration. We developed the Leading Edge partnerships out of the earlier Advanced School concept in response to headteachers telling us they wanted collaboration at the centre of any cutting edge initiative. These partnerships of schools are going to work with the Department and the Innovation Unit to work in a complementary way identifying and developing innovative practice that is directly aimed at being capable of dissemination and replication across the country. Locally generated Federations of schools are being encouraged with seed corn funding and are coming forward in a wide variety of organisational forms and with varied plans. Different plans include federations with single executive heads, extended professional working across more than one school, and joint governing bodies, but all Federations are characterised by having a framework of shared accountability. The lessons of the experiences of all these models of collaboration will be carefully monitored and will help to inform further development of policy.

5. Diversity redefined

As all maintained schools are required to deliver the national curriculum, it would have been more helpful if greater emphasis had been given to the concept of diversity within each school and to curricular flexibility as a means of enabling schools to respond more effectively to the individual learning needs of each pupil.

Diversity is about schools developing their distinctive ethos as a means of achieving higher standards of teaching and learning across the curriculum. The Specialist Schools Programme provides a framework within which schools can develop their strengths in particular areas of the curriculum. The programme forms a main plank of Government policy to encourage greater school diversity.

However, the Committee is right to point out the great importance of 'within-school' diversity. The government fully recognises the importance of within school diversity for all

secondary schools and that this is indeed even more important than diversity between schools, affecting as it does the life of every pupil.

Within the broad framework of the National Curriculum it is for schools to decide how the statutory programmes of study are delivered to meet the needs of individual pupils. Every school must respond to the diversity of pupil needs.

With the introduction of the humanities and music specialisms in 2003 the whole of the National Curriculum is covered by the programme's options. The humanities offer is drawn on a broad basis which takes the overall curriculum range beyond the National Curriculum. The introduction of a "rural dimension" as part of the Specialist Schools Programme is designed to ensure that secondary schools in rural areas can maximise the opportunities which the programme provides. In addition, the option of combined specialisms, introduced in 2002, provides increased scope for the programme to enhance school diversity through making innovative links between curriculum subjects.

The Government's plans for the 14–19 curriculum are also designed to increase opportunities for young people to fulfil their full potential by enabling schools, in partnership with other institutions, to provide tailored programmes of learning to meet individual needs and aspirations. The curriculum will become much more flexible with the concept of entitlement to teaching in certain subjects (e.g. modern foreign languages) that will no longer be mandatory. Specialist schools are expected to be in the forefront of taking the initiative in the implementation of new developments like the broadening of 14–19 'within school' diversity and placing emphasis on the needs of the individual pupil. A pathfinder programme is underway to test different models of collaborative working in different circumstances in order to secure greater choice of curriculum pathways.

6. Diversity redefined

We welcome the commitment of the Secretary of State and the Minister for Schools Standards to pursue discussions with providers outside the maintained system and look forward to revisiting this issue when next we take evidence from them.

We already define diversity widely, and are interested in exploring with providers outside the maintained sector how they might come into it, subject to willingness to meet basic minimum requirements designed to ensure high standards of education for every pupil. To this end, officials have had in-depth discussions with the Steiner Fellowship over the last three years and with Human Scale Education (HSE) for the past eighteen months. Mr Miliband met the Steiner Fellowship recently to discuss new options for setting up the first state funded Steiner school, though a number of issues remain. We have also considered the possibility of HSE schools—both schools within schools and small parent-run schools—being supported in the maintained sector. The Department's Innovation Unit has provided some support for an HSE 'schools within a school' initiative at Seaford Head Community College and is exploring possible further projects. The Secretary of State has taken an interest in HSE's work and has recently met their representatives.

Groups like Steiner and HSE, parent and voluntary groups and other providers currently outside the maintained sector may find real opportunities in the new school 'competitions' now required by the Education Act 2002. Wherever a local education authority identifies a

need for a wholly new school, it must hold a competition in which any interested party can make proposals to run the new school. Also, new regulations and guidance came into force from June this year which we hope will encourage a greater range of providers to put forward proposals for new schools in other circumstances—as any organisation or individual is entitled to do. We have launched a new Website, www.dfes.gov.uk/schoolorg, which provides guidance and helpful tools to those who may be interested in the provision of new schools whether through a competition or other circumstances. The Department's School Organisation Unit will be working closely with potential promoters to provide advice and support where necessary to help them prepare proposals.

The Government's Academies programme also brings the involvement of new sponsors in state funded education, including church related Trusts and a number of entrepreneurs with a keen interest in improving education provision in disadvantaged areas.

7. and 8. Communities of schools: how schools impact upon their neighbours

It is apparent from our enquiry that the impact of specialist schools on their neighbours has been a neglected area of work and one which renders the existing evidence incomplete and any conclusions arising from it, potentially unsound. Without data relating to the composition and performance of schools surrounding specialist schools it is all but impossible to believe that the policy, and therefore the extent to which public funds have been wisely spent, can be properly evaluated.

The Government's emphasis on evidence based policy is to be welcomed, but care should be taken to ensure that research models are sufficiently well developed in order to deliver meaningful analysis. For example, the absence of data on the impact of initiatives on neighbouring schools is a very serious weakness in the existing analysis and should be addressed.

The Government recognises that there has been no substantial research into the impact of specialist schools on neighbouring schools. In one sense this becomes less significant with the drive to make all schools specialist but the issue is important and the Government will consider how this should be addressed. The development of the National Pupil database and the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) will facilitate work in this area. Also, the Centre for the Economics of Education has started to look at the issue of school competition and collaboration. However, in the meantime, and in relation to value for money in the specialist schools themselves, there is extensive evidence of the effectiveness of the programme across the range of schools and across the country. References to sources of such evidence are made in the responses to recommendations two and nine.

The statutory guidance to local decision makers says that when deciding proposals for new schools and for the expansion of successful and popular schools, they must consider the impact on the quality and quantity of other local schools' intakes.

9. Diversity and standards

What is clear is that the Government's over-reliance on a narrow range of research on the comparative performance of specialist schools has served to obscure rather than illuminate the issue. In choosing research partners, the independence of all parties may

be compromised by too close an alliance of Government, research providers (however distinguished) and stakeholder groups.

The Committee says that the Government's claims for the success of the programme rely heavily on the work of Professor Jesson for the Specialist Schools Trust. It is true that Professor Jesson's work (most recently in Educational outcomes and value added by specialist schools 2002 Analysis published 2003), based on the 5+A*-C indicator, provides the most striking comparative data (for both absolute performance and value added) but that work is only one part of the evidence available to the Government and to the Committee. In addition the following sources all give evidence of stronger comparative performance in specialist schools: DfES analyses of absolute and value added performance based on the performance tables for schools' 2002 outcomes; *Using National Value Added datasets to explore the effects of diversity* Schagen I and Schagen S (NFER 2002); *Pupil Progress in Secondary Schools by School Type in England 2001* (DfES 2002); and *Specialist Schools: An evaluation of progress* (Ofsted 2001); as well as additional Jesson work based on GCSE point scores. Whilst these sources do not produce such highly differentiated outcomes as Jesson's absolute performance and value added analyses, they clearly add to the evidence base. It is also important not to dismiss too lightly the significance of the work based on the 5+A*-C indicator. Although it has limitations, this indicator has been the most widely used and best understood measure of school performance for over ten years.

10. Measures of achievement

While we acknowledge and support the use of pupil attainment data for the purposes of strengthening public accountability, the emphasis must be on the use of such data for school improvement. For pupil attainment data to be meaningful in this context the key measures for pupil and school achievement need further development and to be applied consistently across the range of school improvement and pupil attainment projects. In particular, it is vital that these measures provide a picture of the full ability range, including the proportion of pupils who at 16 do not obtain any qualifications, and take full account of the intake profile of each pupil.

The Government fully agrees with the need to emphasise the use of pupil attainment data for school improvement and the benefit of the individual pupil. This was the subject of the Secretary of State's Lecture at the Banqueting House on 4 June. He drew attention to the department's new Pupil Achievement Tracker (PAT) which is being made available to all secondary schools. This will give teachers the information to analyse the past and current attainment of each pupil to help tailor lessons and progression to meet pupils' needs. For example, at KS3 the PAT will enable teachers to identify underperformance while there is still time to address needs before pupils take their GCSEs. In addition, the Secretary of State emphasised the importance of 'assessment for learning': involving pupils in their own target setting; providing structured feedback; and helping pupils judge their own learning.

As the Committee's own report acknowledges, the Department's measurement of secondary school performance for pupils at the end of key stage 4 is not confined to 5+A*-C at GCSE. The performance tables also include point scores, 1+A*-G and value added. All of these address the issue of providing a picture of performance across the ability range and, of course, the value added measure takes account of the prior attainment of each pupil.

11. Measures of disadvantage

The development of more sensitive measures of deprivation than that offered by free school meals eligibility is critical to improving the effectiveness with which policy and resources may be targeted.

The Committee mentions the inclusion of parental level of education as one way forward. There is nothing in prospect for national data on parental level of education although such information is collected in various sample surveys like PISA. Another possibility for supplementing FSM data is the use of postcode data linked to other data sources such as the 2001 Census. Data collection through PLASC must conform with the legal basis of the survey which restricts expansion into areas of socio-economic circumstances. FSM information is an exception because of the legal duty of schools to provide free meals in specified circumstances. PLASC also collects postcode. Work will continue in this area but previous work has suggested that the pupil-based FSM variable is as good a marker of disadvantage of schools as was the ODPM's Index of Multiple Deprivation. The Working Tax Credit, now used in the funding system, slightly changes the dimension on disadvantage, but will not invalidate the FSM variable, which is a valuable tool, albeit imperfect.

So far as the specialist schools programme is concerned it is a policy for all schools and schools with high FSM are well represented in the programme.

12. Separating the impact of investment from specialism and other initiatives

It is a matter of concern that the Government has made its decision to extend access to the specialist schools programme, and associated funding to all schools, in the absence of clear evidence as to the alleged benefits of specialism, balanced against those of other initiatives. Evaluation of this initiative is essential so that the public and policy makers alike can be assured that policy is developed on the basis of sound evidence rather than wishful thinking.

The Committee raises the issue of the impact of the three main elements of the specialist schools programme: processes, funding and specialism. This issue is addressed in the response to recommendation 20. For evidence about the performance of specialist schools see the response to recommendation nine. For reference to the qualitative evidence see the response to recommendation two.

13. School admissions

The evidence we received suggested that any rationale for schools operating as their own admission authority may not be significantly outweighed by the wider benefits, not least to parents, associated with equity and clarity of process.

Of the 21,297 schools in England, the local education authority is the admission authority for the majority—16,142 (76%) For secondary schools the equivalent figures are 2375:1061; and for primary schools are 13,767:4094. LEAs may delegate authority for admissions to the governing body of a community or voluntary controlled school but we are not aware that delegation is widespread.

The admissions framework, including consultation and objection arrangements put in place by the School Standards and Framework Act has worked well—research suggested that 96% of parents seeking a secondary school place got a place at a school for which they expressed a preference. But in the light of this research the Government strengthened the framework in the Education Act 2002 with measures designed to improve local discussion and co-operation to ensure that admission arrangements work to the greatest extent possible for the benefit of local parents and children and to improve the process for parents. These measures include:

- mandatory co-ordination of admissions which will make the process easier and more transparent for parents. They will apply for all the schools they want their child to attend on the LEA's common application form. Only one offer of a school place in the area will be made and that offer will be sent to them on the same day by the LEA, either on its own behalf or on behalf of a governing body that is the admission authority.
- mandatory admission forums with members representing all those with an interest in admissions. Forums are charged with considering how well local admission arrangements are working collectively for all local parents and children. They should consider how admissions processes could be improved and, in particular, arrangements for challenging and vulnerable children and try to promote agreement on admissions issues. All admission authorities in an area must have regard to any advice issued by the Forum.
- wider consultation requirements so that foundation and voluntary aided schools must consult community and voluntary controlled schools on their proposed admission arrangements. Those schools may then object to the Adjudicator if they wish. We are aware that a number of community schools have objected to the Adjudicator about admission arrangements for entry in September 2004, including to partial selection arrangements. The cases have yet to be determined.
- abolition of section 91 so that designated faith schools can no longer keep places open if there are insufficient applicants from the faith.

All admission authorities are subject to the same legal provisions and all must have regard to the School Admissions Code of Practice. If they do not, those affected may complain to the Secretary of State who will consider whether or not to issue a Direction.

The amended Code, issued in January 2003:

- clarifies good and bad practice in determining admission arrangements. It states that admission authorities should carefully consider the possible impact, direct or indirect, on equal opportunities, of their oversubscription criteria. It indicates that criteria which give preference to children whose parents or siblings previously attended the school or whose parents followed particular occupations, such as teachers, could disproportionately disadvantage others such as ethnic minority or refugee families who have recently moved into the area. It points out it would not be good practice for admission authorities to set or seek to apply oversubscription criteria that had the effect of disadvantaging certain social groups in society.

- rules out interviewing of parents or prospective pupils including, for the first time and from 2005, at schools designated by the Department as having a religious character (the majority of which are voluntary aided schools). The Catholic Education Service and the Church of England Board of Education support this. We are however persuaded that there are good reasons for interviewing for boarding places because children are faced with particular challenges and opportunities in a boarding school—and this is the one exception.
- indicates that faith schools can contribute to community cohesion by having admission arrangements that are inclusive of other faiths and of all elements of the population of their local area. Some faith schools already achieve inclusiveness by designating a proportion of their places for which children of their own faith or denomination will be given priority, and the remainder as community or open places for which local children will be given priority.
- recommends LEAs refer objections to the Schools Adjudicator on behalf of parents if necessary.

14. and 15. Selection by aptitude—rationale and evidence?

We are not satisfied that any meaningful distinction between aptitude and ability has been made and we have found no reliance on any distinction between them.

It is apparent from evidence gathered during this enquiry that the current policy which enables schools to select on the basis of aptitude rests on insecure grounds. We are not convinced of the case for selection by aptitude.

New selection by aptitude applies to not more than 10% of places. As the Committee is aware, aptitude selection is used by under 6% of specialist schools but where it does apply, it allows some children with an aptitude for a particular school's specialism, who wouldn't otherwise qualify under its oversubscription criteria, to gain a place and benefit from the school's specialist teaching/facilities.

Under the School Admissions Code of Practice tests of aptitude must be objective and have a distinctive subject focus and the assessment must test only for the subject aptitude concerned, and not for ability or any other aptitude.

Admission Forums must consider how well local admission arrangements are working and may advise against selection by aptitude if they consider that this is not in the best interests of parents and children. Admission authorities must have regard to the advice of the local Forum.

Complaints may be made to the Adjudicator about tests that are not objective, or which appear to test for ability or another aptitude, even where selection for a proportion of children by aptitude is accepted.

Similarly, if aptitude selection is considered to be not in the interests of local children and parents, or is complicating admissions locally, an objection can be made to the Adjudicator.

The Committee may now be aware of the Chief Adjudicator's recent decisions (10 July 2003) in relation to 14 schools in Hertfordshire whose aptitude selection has been objected to. These decisions which were informed by advice from independent experts, helpfully clarify that it is possible to test for aptitude separately from ability, at least in certain subjects. However, the Chief Adjudicator insisted on the need to use either a well-established aptitude test or—where no such test exists, as in sport—an assessment against published criteria by a qualified person independent of the school. The Chief Adjudicator also recommended that the ability profile of those selected for aptitude should be checked to insure against inadvertent ability selection, and if that seems to be happening, tests should be adjusted. A copy of the Chief Adjudicator's article about the decisions ('Apt or able?') is attached at Annex A.

16. Competition vs collaboration

Our conclusion is that competition and institutional autonomy are forces that can be barriers to the capacity for systemic change. The careful coordination of diversity policy so as to ensure the capacity for broad based change should be a prime consideration in the further development of the Government's schools policy.

The Government recognises the need to ensure institutional autonomy and system-wide change. That is why in November 2002 we made a commitment that all specialist school applicants which met the standard against published criteria would be designated. Lifting the funding cap on the Specialist Schools Programme so that all applicants meeting the standard can be assured of designation as a specialist school will help to break down competition and encourage more effective collaboration.

Lifting the cap does not affect the requirements and expectations placed upon specialist schools. Applicants will need to meet the standard for designation and successful applicants will be accountable under the established arrangements for monitoring progress and for regular re-designation after fixed periods within the programme.

Many Government programmes, including Excellence in Cities, help foster an environment of collaboration between schools. Some schools in the Diversity Pathfinder LEAs are already reporting an increased sense of collective responsibility for pupil performance between groups of schools. Other collaborative based programmes, notably Federations, are also contributing to increased collaboration and collective accountability for performance between schools. The Leading Edge Programme is designed to ensure that successful pedagogical practice is shared not only at local level but through national collaboration facilitated by the DfES Innovation Unit.

17. Competition vs collaboration

The Committee acknowledges the Department's renewed emphasis on the collaborative and community aspects of the specialist schools programme and initiatives being developed through the Diversity Pathfinders project. However, we believe that the nature of this collaboration is at present insufficiently focused on raising pupil achievement and therefore (to be consistent with the Government's stated policy) recommend that future funding for specialist schools and the basis of their evaluation

should be explicitly linked to measurable success in raising pupil achievement in partner schools.

Guidance to schools for the preparation of their Community Plans within the specialist schools programme emphasises the need to express targets in terms of learning outcomes as much as possible and the Department will continue to give priority to this in monitoring schools' progress in the programme. However, the Government does not feel it would be realistic to make an explicit link between a specialist school's continued funding and measurable success in raising pupil achievement in partner schools. A typical secondary school partnership within the programme might spend around £10,000 a year on the partnership's activities which is a very small sum compared with the schools' overall budgets.

On the subject of making linkages between the outcomes of partnerships of schools, within the Federations programme it will be possible for schools to recognise their collective responsibility within a federation by publishing the examination results of the federation as a whole as well as the results of the individual schools.

18. What matters most?

We recommend that the position of selective schools in the specialist schools programme should be reconsidered. Eligibility for the specialist schools programme should be contingent upon each school's membership of a community of schools and on the achievement of measurable improvements in pupil attainment across the group of schools.

The Government agrees that selective schools within the specialist schools programme should play a full part in the community element of the programme. Where, in the opinion of the independent assessor employed on the task, a selective school has failed to play that part, the school has not been re-designated in the programme. This will continue to be the case. However, explicit linkage of designation to measurable improvements in pupil attainment across a group of schools would not be practical for the reason given in the response to recommendation 17.

19. Can the achievements of the few be extended to the many?

We would welcome a clear statement from the Government on how it envisages secondary education will look when all schools have specialist status; whether it anticipates further expansion in the range of specialisms; and how the Government, in partnership with LEAs, will secure the strategic distribution of specialisms so as to enable each cluster of schools to have an appropriate combination of subjects represented.

When all schools have specialist status the Government expects to see a good distribution of specialisms across the country and across local areas. The Government has no plans to extend the range of curriculum specialisms. The programme is based around a specialist focus on part of the curriculum as a catalyst for whole school improvement and the specialisms now available cover the full National Curriculum and beyond (e.g. religious education and classics).

Given that the final decision on specialism rests with the school (which is important because of the need for the school's commitment to the programme) it is inevitable that there will not be an ideal pattern of specialisms in every area. However, the Government, in partnership with the Specialist Schools Trust, seeks to ensure a strategic distribution of specialisms by encouraging local partnerships of LEAs with their secondary schools. These partnerships, already working in many LEAs, will seek to establish the optimum distribution of specialisms, taking account of each school's own circumstances.

When it comes to collaboration between local schools across a group of specialisms, the geography of what constitutes the local area will be a decisive influence on the number of schools in the collaboration. A densely populated urban area might possibly cover the full range of specialisms in a programme of activity and the exchange of expertise, whereas a small town with three secondary schools might limit its substantial collaborative work to those three schools. ICT links might increase the range for some purposes and this may be important for towns with only one secondary school.

20. Can the achievements of the few be extended to the many?

The universal specialist system will potentially include all schools and all pupils. The Government asserts that there is a causal link between schools gaining specialist status and their success in raising pupil attainment. Schools which have achieved specialist status can be exciting places with high levels of pupil attainment, as we saw during our visit to Birmingham. The question is, what is the main factor that makes them so? Is it the advantage that extra funds bring? Is it the management process that schools have to undertake? Or is it something inherent in the specialist schools policy itself? The extent to which the apparent achievements of the early specialist schools are repeated by their successors needs to be closely monitored. We urge the Government to engage in a more rigorous evaluation of the current programme than has so far been attempted.

The Government regards all three of the features identified by the Committee (funding, management process, nature of the specialist policy) as necessarily integrated elements of the specialist schools programme. Research, surveys and case studies have borne on these three elements but there has been no research attempting to evaluate in quantitative terms the contribution made by each of the separate elements. It is possible that such work, which would be complex, would identify particular significance to one of the elements but the Government sees no reason in the existing literature to expect that any one element would be shown to be unimportant to the whole. On the broader front, the Government will ensure that the achievements of specialist schools continue to be closely monitored and consider what additional research should be commissioned.

Annex

Apt or Able?

Philip Hunter, Chief Schools Adjudicator

In the new “modernised” comprehensive system now taking shape, the aim is that all secondary schools will become specialist schools. Most headteachers and governors have welcomed this as it offers schools the prospect of additional resources and a clear focus for future development. But, as many have already discovered, preparing a bid for specialist status can be hard work - not least trying to find ways of raising the necessary sponsorship.

So it is often late in the day before would-be specialists face up to the difficult issue of whether or not to select pupils. Some schools might find this an attractive possibility, but need to consider carefully before taking such an important step. Here are some points to think about.

The first point is to work out what kind of selection is allowed by law and what is not. This is not as easy as it might sound. Schools are allowed to select up to 10% of pupils for a specific aptitude in the performing or visual arts, languages, sport or design or IT. Incidentally, this is open to any secondary school that can demonstrate it has particular facilities or expertise, not just specialists. What they are not allowed to do, according to the 1998 School Standards and Framework Act, is select for ability or general aptitude.

If a neighbouring school, or local education authority, objects to a school’s admission arrangements an adjudicator is called in. Usually the objection is that, while purporting to select by aptitude, the school is actually selecting by ability. So it is crucial we know what the two words mean and the practical difference between them.

Finding a difference between the meaning of two such words is the sort of exercise lexicographers get up to when they haven’t enough to do. Most dictionaries tend to use the two words alongside each other in the definition of both. In an attempt to draw a clear distinction, legislators have also got in on the act. The School admissions code of practice gives the following definition: “a pupil with aptitude is one identified as able to benefit from teaching in a specific subject, or who demonstrates a particular capacity to succeed in that subject” —not the most helpful guide to anyone who wants to know what it is.

We can find a way through this by using the word ‘ability’ in the same way as we use ‘achievement’. Ability is assessed using the normal tests used in schools and elsewhere—GCSEs, musical instrument grades, swimming proficiency certificates and so on. These are tests to find out what people can do.

The word ‘aptitude’ then means a gift or a talent. It denotes a potential or propensity to develop an ability given appropriate teaching or preparation. In other words aptitude + preparation = future ability.

The next task is to find a means of assessing a specific aptitude that does not trespass into assessing ability or general aptitude. Aptitude tests are hard to come by but there are a few that have been developed for some subjects. There are tests for languages that rely on the

propensity of children to recognise the meaning of non-familiar languages. Tests for aptitude in music assess the propensity of children to recognise pitch, rhythm, harmony and texture. Tests in spatial awareness can identify aptitude for design and technology. But be warned. Even these tests have a tendency to select general as well as specific aptitudes. Schools can correct for this by making sure that the pupils selected are spread across the ability range but that is an extra stage to go through.

Aptitude tests for sport are being developed but are not yet established. There are no aptitude tests yet for the arts. Here it seems reasonable to rely on the assessment of qualified coaches, directors or teachers. But the people appointed to do this must be experienced and independent of the school and the pupils they are assessing. They have to work to published criteria so there is no possibility of discrimination against applicants on the grounds of gender, ethnic origin, disability or family background.

Having done all this, schools must consult their neighbours and parents properly. This does not mean everybody has to agree but proper consultation involves a full dialogue, taking on board reservation that partner schools or parents might have.

If a school gets that far down the selection path there is one further hoop to go through. It has to go back to the beginning and ask itself why it wants to select. From some of the cases we have had referred to adjudicators recently, it seems some excellent schools have found themselves selecting simply because schools around them are doing so. There is no evidence that they need to select to maintain their standards or ethos or that the children selected do any better than those that are not. A school should only decide to select if it has clearly thought through what it hopes to achieve by selection and why it is prepared to devote resources and energy to a process that has proved to be both time-consuming and expensive.

I am grateful to Professor Dylan Wiliam, Kings College, University of London; Tim Oates, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority; and Chris Whetton, National Foundation for Educational Research for their advice which informed this article.